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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 HONG KONG 002170

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DEPARTMENT FOR EAP, EAP/CM  
NSC FOR DENNIS WILDER

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SUBJECT: HONG KONG'S GREEN PAPER: PATH TO DEMOCRACY OR  
STALLING TACTIC?

REF: HONG KONG 01832

Classified By: Acting E/P Section Chief Craig Reilly; Reason 1.4 (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: The Hong Kong Government (HKG) released its "Green Paper" listing various options for electoral reform on July 11, hoping it would spark a three-month public debate and build consensus for implementation of universal suffrage for future Chief Executive (CE) and Legislative Council (Legco) elections. The public response since the release has been muted and several senior HKG officials recently have suggested that the Green Paper process might be more protracted, although they denied they were stalling. Pro-Beijing legislator Jasper Tsang told us that after the public consultation period, the HKG would report to the central government and await a decision by the National People's Congress Standing Committee (NPCSC) on the "parameters" for electoral reform. Tsang believes that once the central government has "laid its cards on the table," it will become easier for Hong Kong's concerned parties to reach a consensus. The pan-democrats fear the HKG may be using the Green Paper process to manipulate public opinion and delay submission of a reform proposal until the new Legco takes office in September 2008, or even to seek an interpretation of the Basic Law by the NPCSC to rule out universal suffrage in 2012. Political commentator Allen Lee, who has close ties to both Beijing and the pan-democrats, has advised democratic leaders to be pragmatic and support universal suffrage for the CE in 2017, as long as a mutually acceptable nominating mechanism can be devised. End Summary.

¶2. (C) Comment: Jasper Tsang's version of the way forward for the Green Paper process, with Beijing signing off on the general outline before the HKG issues its proposal, strikes us as accurate. Another pro-Beijing contact, Hong Kong Basic Law Committee Vice Chair and former Secretary for Justice Elsie Leung, confirmed the gist of Tsang's comments, noting that the earliest possible time for reaching a consensus would be in the spring of 2008. Other commentators believe the schedule could slip even further due to Beijing's desire to avoid any political controversy before or during the 2008 Olympic Games. Also, with Legco elections scheduled for September 2008, the HKG and the central government might wish to defer formal consideration of a reform package until a new, possibly more favorable (less pro-democracy) Legco takes office. If the HKG's allies, especially the Democratic Alliance for the Betterment and Progress of Hong Kong (DAB), fare well in the November 2007 District Council elections -- viewed by many as a preview of the September 2008 Legco election -- then the HKG may be further emboldened to slow the constitutional reform process. Jasper Tsang's views on public attitudes also seem accurate: an August 7 Chinese University of Hong Kong survey found that 53 percent of the

public prefer universal suffrage for the CE in 2012, but nearly 70 percent would accept 2017 if stipulated by Beijing.  
End Comment.

¶ 13. (SBU) After eighteen months of deliberation by the government-appointed Commission for Strategic Development, the HKG released its "Green Paper" listing various options for constitutional (electoral) reform on July 11 (ref). The release was intended to spark a three-month consultation period through which the government hoped to build a broad consensus on the time frame and road map for implementation of universal suffrage for future Chief Executive and Legco elections. The public response since the release has been muted, which the pan-democrats attribute to the complicated and confusing presentation of the Green Paper as well as its release during the slow summer holiday period, when Legco is not in session.

HKG: No Timetable

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¶ 14. (SBU) On August 15, Chief Secretary Henry Tang said the HKG should not be constrained by any timetable for submission of its report on constitutional reform to Beijing after the three-month Green Paper consultation period. Tang said the report schedule would depend on the volume of views received: "We need sufficient time to integrate the views if we are to reflect them all to Beijing faithfully." He denied that the HKG was procrastinating over the report, which Chief Executive Donald Tsang previously had said would be finished by the end of 2007.

¶ 15. (SBU) On August 16, Secretary for Constitutional and Mainland Affairs Stephen Lam, the HKG's point man for

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electoral reform, urged Hong Kong's political parties to "grasp the opportunity to reach a consensus" on attaining universal suffrage. He denied claims that the HKG was stalling or avoiding the issues of "democratic procedures" as specified in the Basic Law. Lam also listed four "principles for constitutional development" that any reform plan would have to satisfy: meeting the needs of different sectors of society, facilitating capitalist economic development, gradual and orderly progress toward universal suffrage, and consideration of the "actual situation" in Hong Kong. Lam described the various options and timetables under consideration, and said the HKG would closely monitor public support for the various proposals. He emphasized that the HKG had not taken yet "taken a view" on the various issues involved. At the same event, several pro-Beijing trade union representatives opined that the Hong Kong public was "not yet mature" enough for universal suffrage, which they said should not be implemented any sooner than 2017.

Pro-Beijing View

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¶ 16. (C) Legislator, Executive Councilor, and former DAB Chairman Jasper Tsang, who maintains close ties with the central government in Beijing, told us on August 17 that the public perception that the HKG will issue its electoral reform proposal in late October or November is somewhat inaccurate. In essence, said Tsang, there will be "a few more steps." Citing both the recent comments by Chief Secretary Tang and the Green Paper itself, Tsang said the HKG

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would report the results of the Green Paper consultations to the central government. It then would await a decision by the National People's Congress Standing Committee (NPCSC) on whether changes should be made to Hong Kong's electoral system, and if so what should be the "parameters" for those changes. Tsang said the most likely scenario would be that the NPCSC would specify the earliest acceptable dates for universal suffrage for the Hong Kong Chief Executive and

Legislative Council elections. Next, the HKG would hold another round of internal and possibly public consultations, then finalize a reform proposal for submission to Legco. Tsang believes that once the central government has "laid its

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cards on the table," it will become easier for Hong Kong's concerned parties to reach a consensus. He believes -- and is supported by recent public opinion polls -- that the Hong Kong public is pragmatic: if, for example, Beijing decides that 2012 is too early for universal suffrage, then the people of Hong Kong will accept that decision and "move on" to 2017.

Democrats Suspicious

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¶17. (C) Already suspicious, the pan-democrats became more troubled after hearing the statements by Tang and Lam. The fear the HKG may be using the Green Paper process to manipulate public opinion and delay submission of a reform proposal until the new Legco takes office in September 2008. Civic Party legislator and March 2007 Chief Executive candidate Alan Leong told the press on August 13 that the green paper "only serves to enable the government to manipulate the universal suffrage model it intends to push forward eventually." Another pan-democratic Legco member, Lee Cheuk-yan of the Confederation of Trade Unions, told us that he and some of his colleagues fear that the HKG and the central government might use the Green Paper process to request an interpretation of the Basic Law by the NPCSC to rule out universal suffrage in 2012. Lee said the interpretation also could establish "unwelcome conditions," such as a screening process for Chief Executive candidates. Lee was emphatic that the pan-democrats did not want the central government to intervene.

Mediator?

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¶18. (C) On August 16, political commentator and Liberal Party founder Allen Lee, who somewhat uniquely maintains close ties with both Beijing and the pan-democrats, told us that "nothing will come of the Green Paper." He noted that Chief Executive Tsang had promised during the election campaign to produce a plan by the end of 2007, but now there was no chance that would happen. Lee believes that the central government in Beijing does not want to make a decision that soon, which he said forced Tsang to be "sort of wishy-washy."

¶19. (C) Despite his pessimism, Lee said he was very hopeful

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that something could happen by 2017. He said both the DAB and the influential Hong Kong Women's Group publicly supported universal suffrage for the CE in 2017, as long as a mutually acceptable nominating mechanism could be devised. On the democratic side, Lee said he had advised Democratic Party leader Martin Lee that the most important thing was to "start the process of one man, one vote." He said the democrats should fight to have four CE candidates, not two, on the ballot; with that many, they should be able to have at least one of their own. Allen Lee said Martin told him he would consider the idea.

Cunningham